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Country's brightest gems aren't what you heard on the radio

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Let's go ahead and dispense with whatever the corporate radio honchos' definition of contemporary country music might be. We're never going to understand it, anyway, and if we did we'd be understanding something that's inherently un-musical. It sure does sell those pickup trucks, though. Glory be.

It's not that nothing good ever slips through the cracks, it's just that we have every means of hearing and purchasing good music with ease these days, and there's no reason we should have to worry with finding the cracks at all. On occasion, great music makes its way to the radio. For those who would rather not wait until that special occasion to hear something stellar, here are the 10 . . . wait, make that 11 . . . best country albums of 2006.

Gary Bennett, *Human Condition* / BR549, Dog Days

Bennett and BR549 leader Chuck Mead may always be linked to each other, having helped bring BR549 to attention in the short-lived, much-loved Lower Broadway revival of the 1990s. Bennett is now a solo artist, and his *Human Condition* is as lean, tough and true as anything he ever recorded with the BR fellows. Meanwhile, Mead and his BR549 pals continue to weather significant lineup changes and put out superb honky-tonk music.

Solomon Burke, Nashville

Soul veteran Burke came to Buddy Miller's home studio in Nashville and recorded splendid versions of splendid songs. The results are . . . duh, splendid. Burke sings with purpose and strength and empathy, revealing new textures and emotions in songs from Tom T. Hall, Jim Lauderdale, Gillian Welch, Dolly Parton, Paul Kennerley and other Nashville luminaries.

Dixie Chicks, *Taking the Long Way*

Lyrically, "Lubbock or Leave It" and "Bitter End" walk the line between open-heartedness and audience-baiting, and "The Long Way Around" and "Not Ready To Make Nice" sound downright self-congratulatory, but the Chicks score with tender, melodic moments such as those found on "Voice Inside My Head" and "Everybody Knows." And though Natalie Maines' skills as a public speaker have been questioned, her singing voice is a practically inarguable joy. The Chicks are all the poorer for a lack of country radio exposure, and country radio is all the poorer for the lack of this

accomplished band. As for us, we're richer for listening.

Vince Gill, *These Days*

A little time off from CMA Awards hosting duties apparently left Gill with the time and energy to record 43 songs, ranging from hard country to jazzy pop. Lack of a classical number or hip-hop excursion prevents Gill from trying to be all things to all people, but he covers considerable ground on this, the most satisfying release of his career. I prefer the country and bluegrass portions of this program, but there's more than enough here to go around.

Alan Jackson, *Like Red on a Rose*

Jackson's reliability has been much-lauded in a career of meat-and-potatoes triumphs, but he's even better when he's unreliable. He enlisted producer Alison Krauss to help him break from a mold he helped create. I'd buy this album just to hear Jim Cox's keyboard work or to hear the words and melodies created by songwriter Robert Lee Castleman, who has credits on four of these compositions. But the shining star is Jackson's voice, which is as effective conveying merlot sensuality as it has always been with cold beer country.

Jim Lauderdale, *Country Super Hits, Vol. 1*

The title is a joke, at least for now, as these are new songs rather than radio triumphs. But Lauderdale is Music Row's top melodist and one of its most soulful singers, and his collaborations with co-writer Odie Blackmon are worthy of wearing out whatever the digital equivalent is of a record needle. Smart, hooky, traditional country.

Willie Nelson, *You Don't Know Me: The Songs of Cindy Walker*

Nelson's tribute to Country Music Hall of Fame songwriter Cindy Walker spotlights her tremendously influential and enjoyable songs. It also spotlights the extent to which Nelson is still capable of recording timeless music. How does he keep a 73-year-old voice in that shape? I'll have whatever he's having.

George Strait, *It Just Comes Natural*

There's a reason Strait is a Hall of Famer who still connects with No. 1 hits: His voice is wise and easy and cowboy-righteous, and he continues to record definitive versions of great country songs. With 32 platinum-selling albums, Strait is like the music equivalent of the New York Yankees, if the Yanks won every year and weren't owned by a questionable fellow like Steinbrenner. Thank you, sir. Can't wait for the next one.

Trent Summar, *Horseshoes & Hand Grenades*

Folks along Music Row keep rummaging through demo CDs hoping to find the kind of whiskey-soaked songs that fall naturally from Summar's pen and sound natural in Summar's voice. Onstage, he's a frenetic terror. On this album, he's the embodiment of everything that all those chin-out, tough-guy country young 'uns on CMT would try to become if they borrowed a clue from Hank Jr. or any of the other real dudes.

The Wreckers, *Stand Still, Look Pretty*

Critics tend to rail against sugar-coated country-pop, but that's just because most sugar-coated country-pop is so gosh-awful trite and boring. The Wreckers, though, offer sugar-coated country-pop with enough snarl to sound real and enough melody to sink in. In a year of radio sound-alikes, The Wreckers gave us something foot-tappingly different.

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